

BROOKINGS

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Federal Programs for Youth: More of the Same Won't Work

Children & Families, Federal Budget, Opportunity and Well-being

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Youth Today

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The federal government's traditional approach to funding large social service programs – including programs for youth – is in need of reform. Since 1990, there have been 10 instances in which an entire federal social program has been evaluated using the scientific “gold standard” method of randomly assigning individuals to a program or control group.

Nine of these evaluations found weak or no positive effects, for programs such as the \$1.5 billion Job Corps program (job training for disadvantaged youth); the \$300 million Upward Bound program (academic preparation for at-risk high school students); the \$1.2 billion 21st Century Community Learning Centers (after-school programs for disadvantaged youth); and, most recently, the \$7 billion Head Start preschool program. Only one program – Early Head Start (a sister program to Head Start, for younger children) – was found to produce meaningful, though modest, positive effects.

It would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that nothing works in social policy. Most of these federal programs are actually broad funding streams that fund multiple program models and strategies (“interventions”). Although evaluations may show that the program as a whole has little or no positive effect, certain specific interventions within these programs have been found highly effective. But what the evaluations make clear is that much of what the federal government funds through these large funding stream programs is not working as intended.

Meanwhile, the problems that these programs are designed to address have not gone away. Our nation's official poverty rate today is 13.2 percent, higher than in 1973. Careful studies show that the ability of youth to move up the economic ladder relative to their parents has not increased, and may have declined, in recent decades. In education, the United States has made very limited progress in raising K-12 reading, math or science achievement over the past 35 years, according to the government's respected National Assessment of Educational Progress long-term trend. There has been progress in some areas, such as reducing teen pregnancy and violent crime, but in many key areas, progress has been minimal.

Clearly, a new approach is needed. One proposed approach – simply de-funding these large funding stream programs – would amount to giving up the fight against major problems, such as poverty and educational failure, that damage millions of American lives. A far better alternative is to use rigorous evidence about “what works” to evolve these federal efforts into truly effective programs, and to use simulation models, incorporating the best scientific findings, to trace their longer-term effects on participants' life prospects.

This approach draws on the fact that there are examples of interventions that work. Rigorous randomized evaluations, for instance, have demonstrated the effectiveness of Career Academies in low-income high schools (shown to produce a long-term increase in earnings averaging \$2,200 per year); the Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention program (shown to reduce pregnancies and births among teenage girls by 40 to 50 percent); LifeSkills Training for middle school students (shown at the end of high school to have reduced smoking and drunkenness by 10 to 20 percent); and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for severely delinquent youth (shown at the two-year follow-up to have reduced girls' criminal referrals and teen pregnancies by 40 to 60 percent).

Such examples of interventions proved to work are rare, in part because rigorous evaluations are still uncommon in most areas of social policy. Thus, it is likely that other effective interventions exist, but the rigorous evaluations needed to identify them have not yet been conducted. In other words, the fact that an intervention has not been evaluated doesn't necessarily mean that it doesn't work.

To address this, one straightforward reform that the Obama administration and Congress have piloted recently in teen pregnancy prevention, home visitation for low-income families and K-12 educational innovation, involves a "tiered" funding approach. Under this approach, the largest grant awards will go toward expanding implementation of the few proven interventions (the top tier). Other grant awards will fund interventions that are supported by moderate or preliminary evidence on the condition that they will be evaluated rigorously going forward. If found effective, they, too, will be eligible for the top tier; if not, funds will be directed toward other, more promising interventions.

Currently, the public officials who administer the large funding stream programs must often rely on less-than-definitive evidence about "what works" in making program decisions – evidence that can be very helpful but which, experience shows, is too often overturned in subsequent, more rigorous evaluations. This new approach would start providing these officials, for the first time, with the definitive evidence they need to succeed.

Given the staggeringly large budget deficits that loom over the next few decades, and the difficulty of raising taxes or cutting the big and very popular entitlement programs that now absorb close to half of all revenues, cuts in domestic discretionary spending are almost inevitable. Indeed, in this year's budget, the president proposed to freeze such spending, not even allowing it to grow with inflation. Such a freeze requires reallocation of funds within the large funding stream programs for youth, rather than any additional funds. For that reason, we urge policymakers to consider applying the tiered-evidence approach across the broad range of federal social programs that are not performing well.

The American public is increasingly concerned about the way tax dollars are being spent. But constrained opportunities for far too many of the nation's youth are not going away. Our current arsenal of interventions for youth contains some that are not a good use of taxpayer funds and others with very high rates of return. A clear shift in direction, based on reallocating funds to strategies that work, could turn federal social programs into a much more potent force in improving the longer-term prospects for children and youth.